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Gideon Bachmann; Pasolini

*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2. (Winter, 1975-1976), pp. 39-45.

Stable URL:

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*Film Quarterly* is currently published by University of California Press.

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GIDEON BACHMANN

# Pasolini on de Sade

AN INTERVIEW DURING THE FILMING OF  
"THE 120 DAYS OF SODOM"

*Pier Paolo Pasolini's recent death, apparently stemming from an episode that might have figured in one of de Sade's stories, brings to an end a career that deeply influenced Italian literature (he was also a poet and novelist), linguistic thought, and film.*

PHOTO: GIDEON BACHMANN

It is reputed that Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade, spent only 37 days, writing from seven to ten every evening, in composing his masterpiece, the unsurpassed *120 Days of Sodom*, the first *psychopathia sexualis* ever written, and preserved only in fragmentary form. More than half of what has been left are just lists of perversions, lacking that deep sociological and political insight which characterizes most of the Marquis's other work, and which assured him his ranking place in prerevolutionary French literature.

Nobody has ever used a de Sade book as material for a film. It is therefore all the more surprising that Pasolini should have chosen not just any de Sade work, but this mammoth potsherd, running to over a quarter of a million words, as the subject of his newest film, giving up a previous project in order to do so. Since with this film he wishes to return, according to his own assertions, to a more political concern, he might have chosen a less suggestive and more philosophical original.

But meeting the man and discussing one's doubts, it becomes clear how he plans to do it. He

has taken the story of the four debauched gentlemen who exercise every conceivable form of torture and excess on innumerable victims, out of the seventeenth-century Swiss villa where de Sade's imagination had set it, and has placed it in 1944, in a country estate in Italy's northern fascist republic of Salò, Mussolini's last stronghold. And where de Sade attacks God and Nature, Pasolini attacks power and exploitation. Sadism, for Pasolini, is a sexual metaphor for class struggle and power politics.

At the same time, he cannot hide the fact that the purely sensual aspect of the sadistic orgies attracts him, and he admits it readily. Using the work, thus, as a personal statement, he adds another, third dimension: it gives him an opportunity, he says, to re-evolve his own youth, when as a student he fled Bologna and lived in a small village in that same fascist, satellite state where he has situated his story. This was the period when his brother was shot by the Nazis and he himself, as a partisan, wrote those poems which brought him his first, literary fame.

Shooting started on March 3rd, and by sheer coincidence his entire, very short shooting sched-

ule, ended on April 14th—exactly 37 working days. But while de Sade in that number of days managed to describe events taking up 120 days, Pasolini describes only three, hoping to concentrate in this reduced, filmic condensation the philosophy of de Sade adjusted to the needs of our days. Hopefully he will manage to produce more than a listing of tortures.

In judging Pasolini's work, it is perhaps necessary to apply the same tolerance usually accorded to the Marquis: to judge his work as a whole and in historical perspective. De Sade hoped for the French Revolution, which didn't bring him much good, whereas Pasolini seems to have given up his hopes for a contemporary revolution. Perhaps he feels that even a successful one, today, might prove similarly disappointing.

PASOLINI: I simply plan to replace the word "God," as de Sade uses it, with the word "power." The sadists are always the powerful ones. These four gentlemen in the story are a banker, a duke, a bishop, and a judge. They represent the constituted might. The analogy is obvious, and I didn't invent it. I am only adding something of my own and am complicating it by bringing it up to date.

BACHMANN: *What is the remaining, continuing significance of de Sade's work?*

The fact that the body becomes merchandise. My film is planned as a sexual metaphor, which symbolizes, in a visionary way, the relationship between exploiter and exploited. In sadism and in power politics human beings become objects. That similarity is the ideological basis of the film.

*And its story?*

Well, I am surely not planning to create an ascetically political, puritanical film. Obviously I am fascinated by these sadistic orgies in themselves, too. So there you have two basic dimensions: the political and the sexual.

*How are you bringing the material up to date in dramatic terms?*

In an autobiographical way, as it were. Recalling the days I lived in the Republic of Salò, in Friuli. This had become a German region; it had been bureaucratically annexed, and there was a Gauleiter, thought I can't recall his name. It was

called the "Adriatic Littoral," in 1943-44, after September 8th of 1943, and until the end of the War. I spent terrible days there. It was an area of large-scale partisan activity; my brother died there. Our own fascists in that region were real cut-throats. And there were constant bombings; the Flying Fortresses were overhead night and day, going up to Germany. It was an epoch of sheer cruelty, searches, executions, deserted villages, all totally useless, and I suffered a great deal.

*Where were you exactly?*

In Casarsa, the village of my mother's family. I used to spend my childhood summers there. And I had gone back there, fleeing from Bologna, where I was studying. I used to write poetry . . . those that became my first Friulian poems. I was born in 1922. . . .

*How does Marxism keep the body from becoming merchandise? The individual still "sells" his productivity, his physical energy.*

Marx defines power as the force that merchandises the human being. The exploitation of one man by another is a sadistic relationship. It is not different if the wielder of it is a factory owner or a despot of another sort. But I have not had enough experience to answer, really. Anyway, this sadistic organization of our economic life is not an industrial invention, it precedes our age.

*Isn't a bureaucrat a power-wielder?*

Yes, perhaps. Except that one who has had the power *given* to him may exercise it differently than an owner. And I think that there is a basic, psychological difference: a worker in a Russian factory, I think, does get the feeling, somehow, that he *is* the state, he himself, and that thus the factory is his.

*That is only a different form of mythology.*

But the basic consciousness is there. From the little that I have seen in Russia, the people have this basic, different feeling. It may be true that it is only a mental thing, but that's just what counts.

*Don't you get the feeling, sometimes, that equality is just a human invention? All hierarchical relationships are based on fear, and in nature the submissive instinct is as strong as the dominant one. Only we men have given these basic instincts different values . . .*

As far as I am concerned, the submissive

instincts have not changed. Both Marxism and Christianity were imposed from above, and people have continued to live as if neither had been invented. One culture always replaces another; all are human ways of getting along. This submissive instinct resembles Freud's death wish, perhaps? Which again co-exists with the aggressive spirit of love. Christianity changed little in this array, since it was imposed as the religion of the dominant class. The instincts remain.

There is only one system that has made a difference, and that is *consumism*. It has managed to change the psychology of the ruling class. It is the only system that has touched bottom: conferring a new aggressive stance, because aggression is necessary for the individual in a consumers' society: the heroism of submissive gestures, like an old peasant who accepts his fate stoically, is pretty useless today. What kind of a consumer would he be, if he accepted his regressive, archaic, inferior status? He has to fight in order to raise his social standing! All of a sudden, we are all becoming little Hitlers, little power seekers.

*Thus consumism popularises power? And you want to point this out by making a film full of little de Sades? The industrialization of cruelty? A global sadism? Sexual relationships devoid of emotional involvement and thus characteristic of modern social relationships?*

Yes, and something more: I want to attack the permissiveness of our new ways. So far, society has repressed us. Now it offers only a false front of permissiveness. One of the characters in my film says, in fact: "While society represses everything, man can do anything. When society begins to permit something, only that something can be done." This is the terrible double bottom of our new liberties. A greater conformism than before.

*Are you using known actors this time?*

No; just two actresses of the forties: Katerina Buratto and Elsa de Giorgi. They play two of the *raccontesse*s. I have changed them from being old prostitutes into more ambiguous characters, leaving some white space. And I am not really linking the action in a direct way with the Republic of Salò, it's just the *ambiance* of the era. The four men are fascists of that time. I represent them as being particularly cultured, well read, able to read

Nietzsche and Lautreamont, and certainly Baudelaire, but without making them out to be like our famous intellectuals. They, too, remain somewhat ambiguous. And I have tried to avoid any kind of psychology in writing the script, any kind of anagraphical reality, except that the placing of the action in the fascist republic leaves open some ulterior modes of interpretation, or of extension. The events are placed in two localities, in Salò itself, where Mussolini made his last stand, and in Marzabotta, where the Nazis killed a whole town, one of the worst disasters. Maybe some old man in Germany may remember . . .

*The story line remains the same as in de Sade's book?*

Yes. It is the organization of orgies and their realization. And in the end the death of everybody, the final killings. The four depart from the villa near Marzabotta and move towards Salò, where they will be murdered. I reminds me a bit of the march of Mussolini, towards Lake Como. And I have divided the film into segments, like Dante's *Inferno*, and given it, in other ways as well, a structure that recalls Dante, a certain theological verticalism. It is something I have been meaning to do for a long time. Then I read the book by the contemporary French philosopher Maurice Blanchot, *Lautreamont et Sade*, and decided to launch myself into this venture. I have given up the idea of making a film about Saint Paul. Perhaps this is a more meaningful story for today.

*Have you adjusted the story considerably in order to make it fit today?*

Actually not at all, except of course that the period and the decor are those of the Italian version of *Bauhaus*, you know, those "imperial" Mussolini-type adaptations, and we have had paintings by Feininger, Severini, Duchamps, and others of the period reproduced for the decoration of the villa, and Dante Ferreti, our set designer, has gone out of his way to recreate the *ambiance* of what would under Mussolini have been considered a "decadent" style of living, in the assumption that the viewer will believe that the villa used by the debauchers is a confiscated one previously owned by a cultured Jew. And in the executions, for example, I have used the four modes of killing still practiced by our legal institutions: hanging,

shooting, the garrot and the electric chair, methods de Sade hadn't really thought of, or couldn't with all his subtlety conceive. And there are many other contemporary asides: one boy dies with a clenched fist; a woman commits suicide. All this modernizes without changing substance. I have tried not to be obvious. I do not want to hammer the political lesson home with a sledgehammer.

*What are the Dantesque segments your inferno is divided into?*

The round of the manias, the round of the excrements, and the round of blood. At first I wanted to show three of the 120 days, but now, in actually shooting, it all flows together, and there are no clear divisions into days. It becomes a sort of sacred rite, since all the cruelties are wielded with a certain style and according to rules meticulously laid down. I have also written conversations for the four protagonists, which are taken from the books of Blanchot Klossowski, and invented a bit of typical, snobbish business whereby the men talk and accuse each other of misquoting sources or confusing authors. The musical part, which will not be accompaniment but will be dramatically anchored in the action, is the Carmina Burana by Carl Orff, typical fascist music, and some other known scores. And finally, as the last "contemporary" element, I am using a group of youths as collaborators, who are in fascist uniform and armed with machine guns.

*What about emotions? Most of your participants are not actors, and I see that you supply their lines to them once the shooting has actually started, thus making it practically impossible for a person in front of the camera to enter into character. What emotions are shown or expressed, if any, in the interaction of these torturers and tortured?*

I am not hoping to make a film that appeals through the emotions, but I can quote a line for you from one of the characters in the film, concerning the rule they have established that during the final executions one of the four will, in turn, be the killer, two will be his accomplices, and one will watch from the window. "Thus," the line goes, "each one of us will in turn have the philosophical pleasure of contemplation, the par-

ticularly abject pleasure of complicity, and the supreme pleasure of action." But since the film is conceived as a rite, I am having to remind them, occasionally, not to overact, not to do things with too much vivacity, and I find myself using words like "hieratic" and "solemn" in instructing actors.

*You give more exact instructions, then, in this film, than I have seen you do on other sets. How does this film differ, in fact, in structure, from your preceding ones?*

This time I want to make a different kind of film, more professional in a way. For example, in other works I used to instruct the actors in a *visual* way, abandoning them to themselves as far as lines are concerned, and I didn't mind if they didn't deliver them perfectly or if they changed them slightly. This time I want even the nonprofessional actors to act like professionals. Instead of choosing, in the cutting room, the most successful of the improvised lines that I have collected in the camera, and then reiterating them by synchronisation or post-dubbing, and thus ending up with having to use cut-aways to bridge the obvious gaps in continuity, this time I refuse to use cut-aways and I now insist on exact delivery of lines so as to create a streamlined, dramatic structure. Formally I want this film to be like a crystal, and not magmatic, chaotic, inventive and out-of-proportion like my previous ones. It is all perfectly calculated, and for the first time I am having problems with the non-professionals. I cannot allow them as much liberty and inventiveness as before. It all has to fit together.

*Why then do you practically avoid rehearsing? I see you starting the camera practically at once, and then take additional shots as you correct the actors' mistakes.*

I am trying to find a happy middle road. Often they cannot repeat a line well spoken, since they put themselves into it according to their understanding. The intuition which they apply is handy; I don't want to miss a happy coincidence of a man's instinctual understanding of the meaning of a scene. On the other hand I do not hesitate to repeat and repeat until it is done as I want it done. I try not to make them feel too responsible for their failures, and shooting at once helps the feeling of our doing the work *together*. In rare cases, if they

cannot remember a line, I note this during the first shot, and I can divide the line into two takes. But this is very rare. The principle is this: I don't want to use any footage just for making stop-gaps; everything, every cut, is planned to have its significance.

*In what other way are you trying to give the film a crystalline form?*

In the movements, the compositions, the make-up, all the formal elements of film-making. I am seeking perfection, since the modernistic disregard for forms seems to me to be an element of alienation for the viewer used to a certain cinematographic language. The whole structure serves as a sort of fancy wrapping for the horrible contents that is de Sade's contribution, and that of the fascists. I want to convey a sense of elegance and precision, of irreality. My old, magmatic way was more realistic, because a thing badly done and haphazardly stuck together is more real than something done well within the rules. This one is less real because it's more perfect.

*Are you doing this to emulate de Sade?*

Not really, although he was a fairly elegant writer. But he wasn't the kind of writer who wanted to produce the perfect page every time. Some of his pages are pretty bad, in fact, but always there are phrases here and there which stand out in extraordinary beauty. Like "all this is good because it is excessive." A lovely phrase. But I think that if he had cared for the page as such, his would have been the same kind of elegance I am striving for.

*He didn't particularly have the conditions, in the Bastille, to care for the finesse of the page, I suppose. It takes means, peace, and cleanliness; physical things.*

Certainly. But I don't think he really had that finesse in him, after all. Caring for the cohesion of a page of writing was beyond him. He was a writer of structures. Often these were well-controlled, well-designed, elegant like the *120 Days*, which has a precise structural base. Other times his structures were open, flexible like an accordion, with ideas lined up as on a spit.

*Do you feel any sense of identification with de Sade?*

Not really. I was formed and educated in a

cultural, literary climate, where form counts, and thus the page is important to me. I very concretely feel the fact of art.

*I had asked for a rather curious reason: when I watch you work, you seem to be a man in a hurry. In a hurry to turn into reality ideas all ready and bursting to be expressed, almost impatient with the mechanism of translating them into images. And de Sade, at least in this fragmentary work which is at the base of this film of yours, also seems to have been in a hurry, prolific and irresistible.*

What makes me seem to be in a hurry is sheer avidity. When you find yourself in the middle of a beautiful countryside, amidst pleasant people, you tend to become avid, to take as much and as intensely as you can. I was always a happy gourmand in a fruit garden. I experienced reality by taking from it. I had devised a method out of this madness: I was collecting material, to cut later in order to make the film. I had to collect a lot, come home with a full sack, as it were, to be able to make a rich choice. This time it's different, and thus my haste is more calculated. First of all I'm shooting mostly interiors now. And I want a formally perfect film. I can't afford to go on collecting magmatically. I must be more organized during the shooting than with the other films. I already made films like this before, such as *Teorema*. My novels, on the other hand, are magmatic again, within a certain, clear structure. But I have always had a tendency to let myself go when things attract me, and I have chapters in my novels which are very much out of proportion, exaggerated speech, for example, and collecting situations, using too many details.

*In your literary work, do you proceed as you do in film, namely creating the work as you go along, adjusting each particle to the feeling of the moment?*

I think I work on two different emotional registers simultaneously. One is a structural discipline, always quite precise. But within this structure I find myself able to collect material chaotically. This I have done in all my films except *Teorema*, and partly in *Pigsty*. But when I make a film which is basically a metaphor, an allegory, I must work rigidly. Everything you show has a very



*Young fascists  
in Pasolini's  
modern version  
of de Sade*

precise meaning, and you cannot use random choice. In *Teorema* everything was allegorical, and thus functional and significant. I couldn't allow myself the luxury of getting lost in a momentary intuition. The same is true of this film here. It is not as allegorical as *Teorema*, which was a straightforward apologia concerning the descent of God and his relationship to man.

*But you are using metaphor and allegory again, now. What does the depicted misuse of sex stand for?*

Liberty in heterosexual relationships has become obligatory. That liberty is a form of exploitation, a dictatorship of conformity. The couple has become an obsession, an incubus; young people feel they *must* couple off. This is also a misuse of sex. And it is also, like in de Sade, a misuse in the service of power and of the exploitation of the human body. The body is forced—sold—into a position which dehumanizes its soul.

*Do you feel then, that if de Sade were writing today, in the light of the discoveries of psychoanalysis, for example, he would be more readily accepted?*

I think he would still be persecuted. Psychoanalysis is still a rational, critical instrument in the hands of very few persons only. The clergy and the judges seem to have only a very perfunctory knowledge of it. It's still a cultural privilege of a

certain elite. I do not use it in the film, either, just as I am not using our modern way of understanding things emotionally. I have in no way tried to arouse sympathy, and in fact the film would lose its sting if I had. In this I am also very true to de Sade: I have not shown victims whose side the viewer could be on. Pity would have been horrible as an element in this film, nobody would have stood for it. People who cry and tear their hair out would have made everybody leave the cinema after five minutes. In any case, I don't believe in pity.

*What do you quote, in the film, from Klossowski, for example?*

I've picked some excerpts at random, for example the things he says about gestures, the gesticulations of love, or eros, which eternally repeat themselves. The code of repetitiousness, which for example brings him to the conclusion that sodomitc gestures are the most typical of all, because they are the most infertile, the most useless. It's the most gratuitous, and thus most expressive of the infinite repetition of the act of love, and at the same time the most mechanical. It is even worse for the executioner and the torturer, because he can undertake his gestures only one single time. For him the problem is one of quantity, because instead of killing a single, he must kill thousands, in order to be able to repeat his gesture. Or else he must learn to make believe

to be killing but not to kill. This possibility I have used in the film, it is not part of de Sade. And the third adaptation which I have borrowed from both Klossowski and Blanchot is the model of God they propose. All these Nietzschean supermen in using bodies as objects are just another form of Gods on earth. Their model is always God. In negating him they accept his existence.

*Scatological themes have never been used in cinema; this will be the first graphic depiction of*

*this perversion on the screen. Undoubtedly it will arouse violent reactions. What does this theme represent in the film, metaphorically speaking?*

Mainly this: that the producers, the manufacturers, force the consumer to eat excrement. All these industrial foods are worthless refuse.

*How do you see this film's position in the framework of your opera omnia?*

It is the first time I am making a film about the modern world.

**MARGOT KERNAN**

## Cuban Cinema: Tomas Guiterrez Alea

As a teacher, Sergei Eisenstein once told his students that to construct a revolutionary emotional film the director must provide an understanding of emotional phenomena as well as showing how socio-historic forces influence human feelings. To Eisenstein, the "practical reconstruction of social activity" was the highest form of creation, and it occurred when the director was able to "reveal, manifest, and organize—in contradictions—the pictures and phenomena of class-reflected reality".<sup>1</sup>

There are certain parallels between early Soviet films (1919-1929) and the films made during the first ten years of the Cuban revolution. Both revolutionary governments nationalized the film industry and set early priorities for film production as a cultural and educational necessity. But rather than making an overall comparison which wouldn't be justified, it might be useful to examine how three films produced by the Cuban state film institute (ICAIC) and directed by Tomas Guiterrez Alea present a specifically Latin-American view of "the phenomena of class-reflected reality"; and perhaps more important, to understand how these films function as a discourse which oscillates between a public and private view of events, between the overtly political and the apolitical position.

Alea is most widely known for his *Memories of Underdevelopment* [*Memorias del Subdesarrollo*] made in 1968. This was the first Cuban film to be seen widely in the United States, for until 1974 it was the only feature to be granted a license by the US Treasury Department for distribution here, a fact that to many radicals blunted its political edge.<sup>2</sup> Two other films by Alea which are not yet licensed for import into the United States, the earlier *Death of a Bureaucrat* [*La Muerte de un Burocrata*—1966], and *A Cuban Fight Against the Demons* [*Una Pelea Cubana Contra Los Demonios*—1972], show us a director working in a state-sponsored system to make films that reveal "the influence of socio-historic forces on human feelings," and that present a personal as well as a social sensibility.

Alea's film work began before the revolution, when he became a member of the group of young intellectuals that founded the cultural society "Our Times," which made the short experimental film, *El Megano*, denouncing the hardships of the charcoal workers in the Zapata swamps. The film was seized by the Batista government. Alea, born in Havana in 1928, graduated from the University of Havana Law School and attended the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome. He was one of the founding members of the Instituto